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TAGS: [MO](#) [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: PERSPECTIVES OF CBM PARTICIPANTS

REF: A. RABAT 2262

[1](#)B. RABAT 0172

[1](#)C. GENEVA 0408

Classified By: Principal Officer Douglas C. Greene for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: During a three day visit to the Western Sahara, Poloffs and Cairo-based Regional Refugee Coordinator Cheyne had the opportunity to talk to participants in UN Confidence Building Measure's (CBM) family exchange visits from both sides of the berm (Septel from Cairo). On the morning of March 8, 2006, Poloffs and Refcoord met, at Smara airport, families being prepared for their return to Smara camp in Tindouf, after a five day visit to the city of Smara in the Western Sahara. Most families spoke openly and emotionally about their experiences in the camps and to family visits in Smara. All were quick, however to state their determination to remain in Tindouf until there is an independent Western Sahara. By contrast, when Poloffs and Refcoord spoke to Smarans returning to the Western Sahara from their five day visits to Tindouf, they were far less forthcoming in sharing observations of camp life. Poloffs, Refcoord, and MINURSO Poloff Carmen Johns, also visited the home of a family who has chosen to remain in Smara after arriving on a CBM flight from Tindouf. Head of UNHCR operations in the Western Sahara, Laith Khalaf, also gave updates on a story of a woman and child (ref B) who have been the only visitors from the Western Sahara to ask for asylum in Tindouf. They, however, ultimately returned to their home in Western Sahara. End Summary.

Off on the Road to Smara

[1](#)2. (SBU) On the morning of March 8, 2006, Poloffs and Cairo-based Regional Refugee Coordinator Cheyne visited families participating in CBM family exchange visits at the Smara Airport as they waited for clearance to fly back to Smara camp in Tindouf. Poloffs and Refcoord had the opportunity to talk to different family groups including

one young teacher who spent more than ten years of his life in Cuba. Despite the level of emotion encompassing them, those involved were unanimous in their praise of the CBM visitor exchange program as well as the phone services provided by UNHCR. Participants were also unified in their response to inquiries about returning to live in the Western Sahara, responding they would return only "when" the Western Sahara is independent. Some spoke eloquently of their desire for dignity, liberty and humanity in the Western Sahara and expressed the importance of freedom. Others voiced concern that staying in the Western Sahara on one of the CBM visits would be a political statement and that the flights are strictly a humanitarian effort and should be respected as such.

13. (SBU) Differing opinions arose only when individuals from the group were asked about life in the camps. When questioned about schools or health care answers ranged from "excellent" to "nonexistent." One young woman sitting with her sister and sister-in-law and cradling a very small child said that it was "different," then corrected herself saying life is "great" in the camp, there is good health care and good teachers. "In the camps we are free." At the same time her sister, also holding a baby broke down into tears and was unable to answer the same question. The second family, by contrast was clear that there were no schools for the children where they were living and that health care was not adequate.

14. (SBU) A small family of three (an adult woman, her mother and uncle) had come to see an elderly parent in Smara. Initially, the patriarch of the family did much of the talking and when his niece began to respond to a question about returning to the Western Sahara, her uncle quickly and abruptly silenced her. When asked about work the uncle stated that he would do whatever day labor was available, a common response from men in the group. The young woman said she had been educated at a university in Algeria and currently works in the administration office of the camp. When asked why the rest of the family did not join them for the visit, the older man said there were about 200 of them in the camp and there was just not enough room for everyone on the flights - the same reason his niece gave for her husband not accompanying her. The conversation ended abruptly when a man from another family sternly advised in Arabic "don't talk politics", as a reminder or warning.

15. (SBU) When Poloffs approached a young boy of approximately twelve years of age for his perspective on the visit he was immediately joined by his father who had been sitting nearby. The father commandeered the conversation speaking of the need to find a humanitarian solution to the issue, the excellent quality of schools, and the number of educated people in the camps. He stressed, however, that the people in the camps have been living as refugees for 30 years and that the camps are not their homes.

16. (SBU) The last person with whom Poloffs engaged in conversation was a 33 year old teacher. He stated he had been sent to Cuba when he was ten and educated there for ten years. He returned to Tindouf in 1995 to teach. The man appeared more comfortable speaking Spanish than Arabic and did so with a MINURSO Civilian police officer throughout the conversation. While he spoke he layered on clothing, given to him by his family, that exceeded the UNHCR baggage allowance. (Note: Each participant is given a small plastic tote bag that they are allowed fill and carry on the plane. If the contents of the bag spills over the top it is UNHCR's policy to let the owner wear the excess if possible or have it returned to their family locally.) The man claimed a number of children were sent with him to Cuba but he had no idea of how many had gone altogether.

¶7. (SBU) At noon the same day, Poloffs and Refcoord met with a group returning from their five day visit to Camp Smara in Tindouf. It was immediately apparent that this group was far less emotional than the one in the morning, confirming what was said earlier by UNHCR coordinator was normally the case. The returning Smarans seemed far less eager to speak with us, much less candid, and in some cases downright evasive. While the visitors from Tindouf disagreed on some aspects of life in the camps the Western Saharans agreed on nearly everything. The one exception was the extent of damage caused by recent flooding. Responses ranged from very little damage to severe devastation. In response to questions about emergency relief supplies and food being adequate, the response was halting at best with a caveat that if there was not enough friends and neighbors helped out whenever possible.

¶8. (SBU) In general, it was clear that these participants were keen to side-step any potential trouble and fearful of any repercussions. When questioned about the quality of life in Tindouf, many responded in an indirect but telling fashion. On more than one occasion the curt response was "I was able to see my Sister" or brother or father, and nothing more. When Poloffs asked about the work of male relatives or schools or health care, more often than not we heard the same response, "we never discussed that." (comment: An intriguing response considering nearly all the visitors claimed to have done nothing but talked with their relatives for five days.)

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Confirmation and Criticism From Another Source

¶9. (SBU) The reticence perceived by Poloffs to speak about the situation in the camps by those living in the Western Sahara was echoed in comments by a National Geographic reporter, Karen Lange, who recently visited the Western Saharan CBM participants in Tindouf. Lange claims that when she asked to meet with them after their return home to the Western Sahara they told her that they were not comfortable doing so. According to Lange, "they were scared at the prospect of meeting with me" in Moroccan controlled territory. Lange also confirmed what we heard from various sources that young people not involved with the CBMs were protesting in the Western Sahara, looking for a chance to express their preference through a referendum for Independence.

Lange also met in Tindouf with family members who had visited the Moroccan side of the berm. In her words, the visitors were decidedly unimpressed by what they saw; rather than being struck by the level of development in the Moroccan-administered Western Sahara, or commenting on the disparities between the two sides, Lange said the returnees talked about how the Moroccan Sahara, with all of its changes, no longer seemed like their own. Lange commented to Polcouns, "There must be nostalgia at work here, a longing for a remembered home."

¶10. (C) Lange claimed also that while in Tindouf she heard that approximately 9,000 visitors pass through the camps each year, some journalists and others solely to express solidarity with the Sahrawi people. She reminded that this journalistic coverage and commitment from the outside clearly helps sustain the Polisario. She also mentioned that a crew from London's Channel 4 television had been forced to leave the Western Sahara for attempting to film demonstrations. The film crew was surprised by the ejection as they had made proper arrangements with the GOM and were not intending to be provocative, the reporter said (comment: post has not heard anything further about this supposed ejection of the British

television team).

Some Campers Come Home

¶11. (SBU) In addition to speaking with those returning to their respective homes at the airport, Poloffs, Refcoord, and MINURSO Poloff visited a family from the camps who a few weeks earlier had decided to remain in Smara while on a CBM visit. According to UNHCR, the head of household, Aziza and her four small children arrived in Smara and requested permission to stay. The GOM has provided her with a new, furnished home, enrolled her two oldest children in school, and is providing her with a monthly stipend equivalent to USD 150. Aziza and her children represent almost a third of the visitors who have decided to stay in the Western Sahara, fourteen in all.

¶12. (SBU) Aziza, 31 and blind since birth, sat quietly during the visit cradling her one and half year old daughter, who is clearly undersized for her age. Her answers to questions were short, not more than a word or two, and often flushed out by two cousins from Smara who were in attendance during the visit. According to Aziza, she, her sister, brother, and mother were taken by the POLISARIO in 1979. The women and children of the city who were out in the fields were taken but the men who had stayed in the village were left behind. Aziza and her father had not seen each other in nearly 27 years. Her husband, a POW in the camps, escaped Tindouf nine months earlier taking a route through Mauritania and ending up in Smara. When asked if she feared repercussions for her siblings and their families still in Tindouf she responded "of course, it's normal." But as yet, according to the CBM phone calls she receives regularly since her decision to stay, there has been no backlash at all and the rest of the family remains on the CBM waiting list.

And Some Decide It's Just too Rough

¶13. (SBU) By contrast there has been only one visitor from the Western Sahara to travel to Tindouf and decide to stay. (ref B) In January 2006, a woman, seven months pregnant, arrived in Tindouf to visit her aunt and other family members. She requested asylum for herself and her small son. According to the UNHCR director, two weeks later her husband arrived at the HCR office in Boujdour, her home in the Western Sahara, saying she wanted to return. The woman had initially decided to stay in Tindouf because she had nothing in Boujdour, no job, not enough food, and no home. She returned, however, only two weeks later because according to her, the situation was far worse for her in Tindouf, including a lack of health services, and she feared for her health and that of her unborn child.

Comment

¶14. (SBU) Poloffs were pleased to see participants on both sides so clearly overjoyed with the CBM visits. Participants also seemed adamant about treating the visits as a humanitarian mission and not an opportunity for propagandizing. Unfortunately however, there still appears to be fear and skepticism on both sides of the berm about repercussions. In Smara, people claim that there are police staged outside each and every home hosting the Tindouf visitors 24 hours a day for the duration of the trip, presumably to prevent any politicizing of the program. On the Tindouf side we heard from the GOM, UNHCR, and MINURSO that fears of "keeping family members hostage" in the camps while the rest of the family visits the Western Sahara may be justified. Indeed everyone we spoke to from Tindouf had family who had remained in the camps. However, considering stories like Aziza's and her visit turned relocation with all four of her children, may lead

one to question if some family members remain in the camps simply because of the sheer size of the families. As one head of household put it, I have over 200 family members left at camp, there simply is not enough room on the flights for all of them "yet."

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